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THE AMAZONS

8

POEMS

by YVONNE FFRENCH



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Y. ff.

MYTHOLOGY AND SCRIPTURE

The Amazons

THE inextinguishable sun; a sky
Of brass over the Abyssinian waste.
Hills to the south, arid and rock-encased
For months, are tired and torrentless and dry.
Born of the sand and drifting like a sigh
A column cloud advances in hot haste
And all the rocks re-echo as the chaste
And stormy-hearted Amazons go by.

Their eyes like diamonds flashing in a mine
In each dark face fanatically shine,
Their wild hair mingles with their helmet crests;
And as Penthesilea swings her blade
The foe recoils defeated and dismayed
With horror at their mutilated breasts.

Andromache Bereaved

TUMULT below the walls of Troy is stilled;
Subdued, the Amazons fling down their arms
And see the sloping sun behind the palms
Inflame the rigid bodies of the killed.
This evening nothing matters any more;
A few scared jackals cringing from the fires
Hear from afar the sound of mourning lyres
For Hector, dead, and for the epic war.

Now, even now Andromache, austere,
Doric and calm beside the spattered bier,
Carves in Antiquity her tragic frieze;
And as the day turns routed from the skies
She draws the hero's head upon her knees,
And Helen, shamed, averts her troubled eyes.

Et in Arcadia Ego

SHEPHERDS, Arcadian shepherds leave your flocks
Grazing in slow contentment in the glade.
Come, where I lie at rest beneath the shade
Of these green olives through whose silver locks
A faint and scented wind breathes ancient dreams.
Shepherds draw closer yet, and have no fears
Of one who climbing down the ascending years
Returns a wistful wraith from Stygian streams.

Cast not aside your broad-brimmed hats and staves
Shepherds, I have but come to ask you whether
Long years ago in Thessaly you saw
At break of day, emerging from their caves
Uprooting trees and trampling down the heather,
The Centaurs and the Lapithae at war?

Underworld

STYX is a stream of sadder tides than those
Where you now trail your hands and cool your feet
Among fresh marigolds and meadowsweet.
Upon its shores no flower ever grows;
Nor sign to tell the traveller where he goes,
But a dumb waterman comes up to meet
His passenger, and leads him to his seat
And ferries him across to his repose.

In these dark waters no vainglorious swan
Seeks his reflection; and the turbid stream
Knows only Charon's shadow, bent and swaying
The shore recedes all colourless and wan
And the pale stranger hears as in a dream
The hound across the river faintly baying.

Pan

THEY visit me no more that often came
On summer mornings, white, and drenched with
dew,
To wreath my shrine with laurel or with rue
And swing a votive censer to my name.
No, no, they come no longer, for the star
Of woodland deities has now forever
Set; and stranger gods have called the nymphs to sever
From old beliefs and follow them afar.

Moss gathers on my horns: the wild briar weaves
Round them divinity's eternal crown;
The sun shoots arrows through the leopard leaves
That flea the fluted pillar gold and brown.
Still with cleft hooves that bruise my trampled tomb
Clamour the flocks that mourn me in the gloom.

Sub Imperio Augusti

. . . *After Hérèdia*

As on a rich, illuminated page
Loaded with gold, and silver, and enamels,
The Wise Men on their starlit pilgrimage
Headed a swaying caravan of camels
To pay their homage to a sleeping child;
With gems, and spices, and celestial globes
Across a territory, white, and wild
Their sombre slaves sustained their gorgeous robes.

Then stooping low within the sainted shed,
Humbly discarding their magnificence,
They knelt before the meagre, makeshift bed;
And thus, of old, in answer to a star
Presenting gold, and myrrh, and frankincense,
Came Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar.

The Search for Truth

THROUGH a green shade diffusing greener light
The lamp, like Truth, falling upon me, glows.
It warms the books in rich, complacent rows
And disinherits the approaching night.
But lest I search for Truth she slips away
And in her wilder habitations dwells
Among the brown bees in their hollow hills
Shadowed in caves throughout the blazing day.

Here then am I, lost in the night of doubt.
A traveller in the continent of doubt;
Needing a sign like that prophetic pyre
That led the returning Children, mute and bowed;
That moved above the Red Sea like a cloud
And clove the Egyptian night with towers of fire.

The Trebia

Aster Hérèdia

THE fatal day dawned coldly, and revealed
The waking camp: the river ran in flood
Where the Numidian squadrons stanchéd their blood.
The air resounded as the trumpets pealed.
Scorning false auguries and Scipio's warning,
The swollen Trebia and the wind and rain,
Sempronius Consul, glorious and vain,
Had pushed his lictors on into the morning.

In the black sky a lurid line proclaimed
The sacked Insubrian villages that flamed,
An elephant trumpeted afar and stirred:
And thus, below the bridge against an arch,
Hannibal, musing on his triumphs, heard
The muffled tramp of legions on the march.

The Prophet

HIGH in the mountains when the sun has fired
A last salute extinguishing the day,
The evening closes nebulous and grey
About the region where he lives retired.
And having prophesied a truth required
Though none will listen to his words to-day
Here, where the torrent sweeps his voice away
He lives alone, and utterly inspired.

Darkness delivers him his dreams; his cries
Echo calamitously round the skies;
His warnings fall upon the heedless air.
Until he sees, as dawn dispels the gloom,
The world embarking on a sea of doom
In those twin ships, Disaster and Despair.

The Scapegoat

BURDENED with great iniquity and pain
In the vast wilderness of human scorn
The scapegoat travels on towards the dawn
Another outcast yet, another Cain.
No herdsmen claim him now, for him in vain
All pasturelands and bright, sweet streams are torn,
And leader's bells, and struggles horn to horn
In the green valleys of his old domain.

In some precipitous ravine of stones
He stumbles on his predecessor's bones,
Pale sepulchre of unresisted blame;
Then idly, where a few sparse grasses grow
He crops the stunted nettles of his woe
And drinks the brackish waters of his shame.

NATURE

C

In Cornwall

ABOVE the cliffs, those whetstones of the ocean
That hurls its foaming breakers to be ground
Against them in tumultuous commotion
Of effervescent surge, and spume, and sound;
The crying cormorants and black-backed gulls
Scream in their wheeling flight above the shale,
Steeply ascending with the rising gale
Or falling, leaflike, as the tempest lulls.

On rocks that ring with melancholy cries
Their wings will fold upon the form of Sleep
Dropping, with sunset and the wind, their flight.
Then up from the unfathomable deep
Pale as romance the winter moon will rise;
And Iseult's ship shall navigate the night.

Bas-relief

WHEN moving clouds are sculptural and cold,
Chipped by the chisel of the evening breeze,
They fringe the sky in a heroic frieze
Assuming forms fantastically bold.
Changing their attitudes by slow degrees,
Heraldic beasts whose rampant limbs unfold
Dissolve in furnaces of molten gold;
And brooding Titans hug their mighty knees.

Though the dark pinions of the twilight screen
The glorious Gods, recumbent in their cars
Whose plunging horses chariot them to heaven;
They too are there, inhabiting the stars,
Perfect, as those diminished figures seen
On ancient seals in chalcedony graven.

Evening at Bellosguardo

COME, for the slanting sun has on this tower
And its surrounding cypresses, a rain
Of purest gold distilled, and every pane
Glows like a furnace at its fiery power.
Now all the hours are walking hand in hand:
But dawn, the last, is pinioned by the wrists;
While dusk, enveloped by surrounding mists,
Closes the eyes of an exhausted land.

A cypress shadow like a sombre steeple
Crosses our path and points towards the gloom.
And we, upon the terrace, looking down,
Watch red fires smoulder out from every room;
Hear emptiness descend upon the town
And darkness on the laughter of the people.

Farewell to Florence

Now that I leave this town of scarlet lilies
By night and in the dark October rain,
Strange images confront me of Cockaigne
Where the moist meadows breathe of amaryllis.
Now swept by wild autumnal gales her trees
Call to me desperately: Turn, Return!
To powers stronger than the spells you learn
From voices over siren-haunted seas.

To-morrow's skies will be as calm and clear
In Tuscany as those of yesterday;
Warm with the breath of vintage and of sun.
But I shall see a coastline, white and grey,
The mirthless gravity of Dover pier
And London in the twilight, huge and dun.

The Pine Forest near Pisa

I saw as dark spectators by the sea,
Their ranks fast rooted in the grinding sand,
The pines, the sombre shadows of the land
Veiling the sunburnt coast of Tuscany.
Their green arms waved with rapture at the strong
Westerly gales that water them with brine;
But warm the windless summers, and divine
The sea's long, low, uninterrupted song.

No one to-day is living who can tell
What these unageing pines remember well.
For in their shade, on fiercer noons than these
Forging his inspiration like a chain,
Shelley would walk abstractedly, while Jane
Sang to him from a distance through the trees.

The Flight

THE blocks are moved releasing her. She swings
Speeding like wind across the grass-blown ground.
Swift in the winter sunlight, wheeling round
She pauses, breathes and shivers through her wings.
Then roaring glory, into blue she sings,
Storming the heights of heaven to astound
The little world below, confined and bound
By old beliefs and dull imaginings.

Now we are hanging sideways in the sky,
My heart beats sullenly as I descry
The sulphur cities smoking in the plains
And call to memory that Michael hurled
Forth from this loneliness where beauty reigns
The lost Archangel on a driven world.

THE TROPICS

Equatorial Forests

THROUGHOUT the year their days are much the same,
Grand, and extravagant, and very still;
For sunk in torrid lethargies of will
The seasons change no substance but their name.
Rain and intolerable heat they bear
Whose slow, successive days are uniform,
And every suffocating night a storm
Charges the thunderless, electric air.

Along profound, impenetrable ways
Fearful and fabulous lianas raise
Their spiral tendrils poisonously curled.
And lit by violent flashes in the sky
The monstrous scene awaking, vividly
Resembles the creation of the world.

Sunrise in the Tropics

GREY as the banks of mud on which they tilt
Their armoured heads, the alligators smile;
Alternately disclosing greed and guile
While staring at the thickly moving silt.
And when the suffocating night has gone
Discovered by the dawn in quick surprise,
They blink the shutters of their gilded eyes
And turn and plunge into the Amazon.

Feeling the sun's incendiary hand
Ignite the densely vegetated land
Parrots and brilliant parrakeets emerge;
And leaving their green palaces and domes
They scream across the forest's leafy verge
Like fugitives forsaking stricken homes.

The Elephants

ON the cold terrace of a winter sky,
Blotting the nascent moon from earthly sight,
Yet fringed by one pale filament of white
The clouds patrol monotonously by.
The mango grove is sinister and sly
And on the boughs no foliage hides the night
That shrinks from contact with the leaping light
Cast by our watchfires burning fitfully.

This is no tent but an enchanted ark
Where sounds on myriad sounds have leapt and stirred.
There is no comfort in the pulsing dark
Till, through the rhythmic singing of the crickets,
Mighty and chained the elephants are heard
Restlessly stamping at their hammered pickets.

Water Buffaloes

THEY haunt the shadowless and shoreless jheel
That breeds white heat, malaria and flies;
And that the Indian sun's transmuting eyes
Has burnished till it seems a lake of steel.
Across the water skims a flight of teal,
A ripple on its surface spreads and dies.
The frail reeds stir, and in their Paradise
Of cool content, the buffaloes reveal

Their dark grey heads magnificently crowned
Whose bodies stand invisible and drowned
In shallows that the thirsty noon devours.
And so, like mystics in a state of grace
That mildly meditate on time and space,
With clay-blue eyes they pass the scorching hours.

In the South Atlantic

VAGRANT and slow, white avenues of clouds
Sail in high regions of the darkened sky,
A flock of tireless ghosts who trail their shrouds
Far out across the night's immensity.
Who are these lonely spirits? from what land
Of cold aerial enchantment glide
These silent phantoms mirrored in the sand
Of the Atlantic shore's receding tide?

Roll on, cold citadels of stormless life,
We are too crude to gather to your breast
Like sleeping children; still too unrefined,
Polluted by the frenzy of our strife,
To seek the shadows of your clouded rest
And drug the fitful terrors of the mind.

OCCASIONAL STANZAS

Lines on Some Ruins by a River

GREEN weeds and grass spring up from crevices,
And here and there a small, earth-fallen star
A dandelion shines. On lofty terraces
The purple scabious blossoms from afar.

Below the grey and ivy-strangled keep
The moat is overgrown and the young larches
Extend their arms to where untroubled sheep
Crop the thick verdure under shattered arches.

River, reflect it then; and then reflect
Time's gentle hand upon its failing heart;
And let your vision be more circumspect
Than any painter's with his vaunted art.

Lines on Some Eucalyptus Leaves

YOU scimitars of tender bloom
Whose fragrance inundates the room
Sweeping your silver scythes in air
Made warmer to preserve you there;
What vandal tore you from the shade
Of that reviving colonnade
Through whose grey groves insistently
Murmured the dark Tyrrhenian sea?
Time after time, when one by one
The slow clouds drift across the sun,
Meet and dispel, and meet again
To swell and rally into rain;
When pale, discarded leaves are sent
Careering to their banishment,
And in the London afternoon
The blood-red sun goes down too soon;
Swung on your fragrance to the South
I feel the warm air fan my mouth
And once again Sicilian shores
Are lit by classic meteors
And nightingales and sea-washed shells
Sing at my head and feet like bells:
Till darkness shows you suddenly grown
As silver as the sickle moon.

Snow

MORNING! how dark and grave you are.
Was the sun here, and has it gone?
Shone ever a white, seraphic star
In that despairing sky, alone?

Draw my green curtains, let there be
No more this February day;
No more that stretch of wintry sea
So desolately bleak and grey.

Yet leave them open. So reveal
That ghostly tree, that bitter thorn,
Whose fingers, riveted with steel
Clutch at the rigour of your dawn.

For as a felon dreads the wrath
Of his tormentor, now you grow
Livid before the sullen north
And brood upon its coming snow.

Homecoming

DRY leaves are blown along the empty street,
A cold grey light prevails.
The frosted pavement echoes with my feet,
And my heart fails.

Winter Over

ZEPHYRS now blow and buds grow daily fatter,
The shepherd meets the season with a sigh;
And all the clouds unharnessed gently scatter
To pasture in the meadows of the sky.

BLIND are the fringed eyes,
The contours in repose,
.In virgin linen lies
The white and bloodless rose.

The tintless lids are veiled,
The chiselled nostrils breathing,
A smile is even wreathing
The lips that death has paled.

The alabaster brow
Transparent as the air,
Is purple-netted snow
On either temple where

The intersecting veins
Like webbings of intrigue
Are mingled in a league
Of terror-binding chains.

The voice for ever mute
O nevermore revive
With missal or with lute
That cherished it alive;

And nevermore disturb
From the unfevered breast
The waxen hands at rest
That plucked the bitter herb.

Amazonas

Far from the land where horn-rimmed Culture peers
With powerful lenses at its cancered brain,
And Relaxation, phoned about the ears
Clashes its cymbals to a negro strain;

The great queen, coiling through her torrid lands
And steaming forests, like a python, gleams,
Till dawn, exposing her with fiery hands,
Breaks through the sullen splendour of her dreams.

She lies there, vast, uncivilised, supine,
Her savage beauty bears no trace of scars;
And on her brows the glittering Andes shine,
Plumed by her palms and circled with her stars.

The Condor

After Leconte de Lisle

B_{EYOND} the structures of the rigid Range,
Past drifting mists where shadow eagles fly,
Past crater funnels yawning near the sky
Whose sluggish streams of lava interchange;

His wings distended, scarlet streaked on dun
The vast bird broods with melancholy grace
In silence, at America and space
While his cold eyes reflect the dying sun.

The night rolls onward from the east where wild
Hill terraces enclose the pampas downs
And cradles Chile, villages and towns,
And the Pacific, limitless and mild.

And all the continent is now embraced
From shore and slope, to gorge and steep divide;
From crest to crest it eddies till the tide
Flows over and the whole world is effaced.

Bathed in a flush that inundates the snow
Poised like a phantom on a craggy height,
He waits the flooding of the waves of night;
They break across him conquering the glow.

Out of the void the Southern Cross illumines
The coasts of Heaven with constellated flares.

He rattles harshly with delight; he rears
His skinny, muscled neck and shakes his plumes,

And whipping up the Andes' bitter snow
Screaming, he soars to where no winds can blow,
And far above the dark and distant sphere
He sleeps, on giant wings, in glacial air.

Recollection of Ludwigslust

IN avenues deserted by the sun
Summer long fled, the sodden earth receives
The relics of your withered linden-leaves
And buries them in silence one by one.

Honeyed no more by bees their flowers fade,
No longer need their drifting odours last
When hour by tintless hour becomes the past
Whose sun has perished in the arms of shade.

Now breathing fumes of aromatic musk
The season pauses mistily to bruise
Those stagnant waters, where the lilies cruise
Mild as magnolias in the summer dusk.

Now steel winds strip the labyrinth of leaves,
Wreck the rich borders and the sombre grove,
While in the evergreens a spectral dove
Invokes her sisters in the sloping eaves.

Foredoomed to solitude, forsaken, dark,
The stone Minerva shall your priestess be;
And in the night, above the lonely park,
The wild swans' cry shall be your elegy.

To Autumn

WEARY of winter
And sick of the spring;
Detesting the summer
And all it will bring
I turn to your stillness.
And my eycs are kissed
By the moist melancholy
Of your falling mist.

The Flowers

Go not into the garden for they sleep.
The dew-drenched evening swings them to her
heart;
And their pale heads hang drowsily and keep
(Following the insect-murmur of the day)
The tune and traffic of uncounted bees.

Already dreaming, see, they cast away
All thought of gardens, and the gentle breeze
Fans them along to visit in the fields
Their shy, wild sisters of a poorer soil;
To envy them their pastoral liberty
And bright felicity.

While some, in dreams, explore the ocean-bed
And are transported thither in all speed
To trail their oozy petals, garlanded,
Through glaucous caverns where, amongst the weed,
They bow and wave and quiver in the stream.

Go not into the garden for they dream.

To a Gardener Trimming a Laurel

GARDENER, spare the laurel queen,
Spare each leaf of glistering green,
Each shining lozenge is a strand
Of Daphne's locks; perhaps her hand
Stretches in supplication where
Your sickle menaces her hair.

Shearing her lustrous comeliness
You will occasion her distress
And terrify, with probing dart,
The birds that flutter at her heart
Whose dark recesses, cool and still,
Are sanctuary and citadel.

Gardener, gardener, Daphne's tears
Glitter on your steely shears;
Spare her pride and spare her pain.
Ringed with jewels by the rain
Spare each chrysoberyl finger;
Suffer her awhile to linger
As the daughter of a king
Green, and bright, and flourishing.

A Landscape Painting

REST in the sun-warmed grass,
Indolent child;
And watch the shadows pass
Above your head
In the tremulous August air.
Everywhere
Labour stands still;
No birds are singing here
And high noon reigns.
By the water mill and the weir
A motion pacifies the air
Eager for rhythm.

Rest in the fountainous grass
And let the sun, gold archer, fleck
And freckle your pale skin
Through the wide lattice of a shady straw;
Dapple your neck
And gild the peach
To apricot upon your cheek
More, and still more.

What fancies throng your thoughts?
Are you—as the late afternoon deepens
And the sun pursues his rapturous course
Right to the end in a flaming sky,
Casting a benison across the lake—

Are you who lie there calm and mild,
Caught in his blushes,
Unaware
Of setting suns, impassive child?
And swans in flight
Above the rushes?

Street Music

SULTRY the house and in the heat
More sultry still the summer night,
As she leans out in slack delight
And gazes down the airless street.

Beneath an arc of lantern light
Thin single notes come up to meet
The Irish servant, and invite
Forgetfulness to bathe her feet.

Old tunes arise.
How plaintively they come
Plucked by the harpist hand.
The feet forget their restlessness
The hands repose their dull distress
Thinking themselves at home.

By some metamorphosis, strange
The bricks around the window change;
The sill shoots jessamine, the eaves
Droop with the weight of ivy leaves;
And in the vaporous distance, rain
Freshens the cattle-trodden lane.

Old songs, old tunes,
Old half-remembered airs
And all Moore's melodies

Flood through the night in iridescent streams.
Rest, aching feet,
And swollen hands lie still.

Charmed is the moment, O persuading harp!
And charmed her dreams.

The Triumph

ONCE as the sun leant low upon the sea
And with its red blade carved a mass of cloud,
My Muse, thought-reading, interrupted me
With "Look at Heaven's festivals at last!"
And coldly, "Where?" I said to her aloud.

Then scarcely larger than a distant sail
That flaming sun had vanished from my view;
But tinted monumentally, its trail
Revealed immense processions as they passed;
And Triumph with his rosy retinue.

THE END

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